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Before You Open It: A Checklist for Planning New Museums in Historic Buildings

In almost every community in Texas history enthusiasts are contemplating founding a new history museum in a historic building or historic house museum. There are literally hundreds of such museums in Texas and, realistically, most of them struggle for funding, community support, and visitors. Before your group takes the very large step of setting up what is supposed to be a permanent history organization responsible for holding important structures and artifacts in trust for the public, please consider the following questions, beginning with this one:

Write a short paragraph about why you are opening a new museum, what it will contribute to the community, and why the functions of this museum could not be done by any other group that is already in existence. Who is the main audience for the museum? Who would make up secondary audiences?

Next, consider these important issues:

A. Mission/Purpose/Importance

1. What is the purpose/mission of the museum? In other words, what are you going to do, and who for, or with?
2. Does the community want this new museum? How has the community indicated its desire for it and demonstrated its intent to support it?
3. Is the property historically important? Did anything famous/notorious occur there? Anyone famous live there?
4. Is there any historical importance that would be a draw to anyone outside of the immediate community?
5. What important history can be taught at this site that isn't being taught elsewhere already or could not be taught anywhere else.
6. Does the property qualify for any designations like the National Register of Historic Places or the Registered Texas Historic Landmark designation? Are there any local designations?

For assistance with determining historical importance, consult the National Register of Historic Places listing of categories: <http://www.achp.gov/nrcriteria.html>

B. Property and Condition

1. What is the property? House, commercial building, farm building, etc.
2. What is its primary construction? Brick, wood frame, etc.

3. Has it recently been occupied?
4. What was its most recent use?
5. What condition is it in?
6. Has the property been changed so much that most of the historic integrity is gone?
Are any such changes permanent or reversible?
7. Does it have working electricity, air conditioning/heating, and plumbing?
8. Does the roof leak?
9. Does it show evidence of shifting/settling of the foundation?
10. How much land is included? How much has the landscape changed from what it was during the period of significance? Can the landscape be restored to the period of significance?
11. Where is the property located? What context is it in (residential, rural, commercial, etc.)?
12. What about access and parking?
13. Is the building on public or private property?
14. Who will pay property taxes and costs of a survey, a Phase I environmental study, etc.?

C. Furnishings, Collections, Archives

1. Does the property include relevant furnishings---furnishings that belonged to the principal occupant?
2. Are the furnishings important? Are they related to the mission/purpose of the museum and the importance of the house?
3. Are there furnishings that are not in the structure---stored elsewhere?
4. What condition are the furnishings in?
5. Are there other important materials such as photographs, documents, and books?
6. Where would collections not needed for exhibit be stored? If off-site, what would be the cost?

D. Operations and Finances as a Museum

1. What do you envision would happen at this museum?
2. What days/hours do you contemplate the museum being open?
3. What is the main source of income for the museum?
 - a. If the city/county, is there capital funding to establish the museum and
 - b. Will there be operations funds provided by the city/county on an annual basis to run the museum
 - c. Who would pay for the utilities?
4. What other sources of income are there?
5. Is there any endowment included with the property?
6. Is there a business plan for the museum and has a capital and an operations budget been prepared?

7. What are the costs of locating a museum here? What are the property taxes, if any? How about insurance for the house and collections?
8. What other costs should be considered?
9. Who will actually work at the museum and operate it?
10. Are there readily available volunteers?

E. Governance

1. Who will govern the museum? Private board, or public governmental agency or department, etc.?
2. Has a non-profit organization already been registered with the State of Texas and the Internal Revenue Service?
3. If private, how many people and what experience do they bring with them?
4. If public, what department, and do they have other cultural facilities in their domain?
5. If public/private partnership, what provisions will be made in writing to secure continued city support over what period of years?

F. Alternatives

1. After answering all of the above questions, look again at your answer this question: why are you starting a new museum, and do you believe that what you are doing is not and cannot be done by any other group or organization?
2. Finally, consider the possible alternatives to starting a new museum as outlined in this publication available through the Texas Historical Commission. There are other ways to preserve and interpret history:

<http://www.thc.state.tx.us/public/upload/publications/Alternatives%20to%20Starting%20a%20Museum%20Medallion%20Article%202013.pdf>

Additional Resources

The following practical discussion about the possible opening of a new museum was delivered by Bob Bluthardt in Green County, Texas in 1997.

A County Historical Museum?

Presented at the Tom Green County Historical Society Meeting
held at Fort Concho's Officers' Quarters 8

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For more than a few years this community has discussed the possibility of a Tom Green County Historical Museum. As this city's cultural resources grow and improve, it is a good time to take another look at that idea from a more critical standpoint. To put it succinctly: what type of museum do we envision and how would it be created and operated? To quote the old newspaper reporter guideline: "Who, What, Where, When, Why and How."

Let us start with the question, WHY.. Why do we want to create a Tom Green County Museum? Usually, cultural institutions are created to fill a need not already served. Do we already have museums in the community? Certainly, we have Fort Concho, the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, the Railway Museum, Miss Hattie's, and the San Angelo Nature Center. And we have a number of exhibit and display venues with the Chicken Farm Art Center, Angelo State University, the many private galleries, and even some businesses and government agencies. But do any of these cover local history on a regular

basis? NO. Ironically, the institution where we meet used to cover practically all of the previously mentioned themes.

When Fort Concho was founded as a preservation project in the late 1920s, the leaders dreamed of preserving the entire 40/acre-30 building site but to use it in a very broad thematic way. Many among you can recall the fort displays on natural history, some local history, art, geology, photography; we even had a steam engine! In the past twenty years the fort has made tremendous progress and now looks more like a frontier army post on the exterior. Thus, interior exhibits and displays have been refined to reflect that new mission, The creation of an art museum, a nature center, and a railroad history came with assistance from Fort Concho, which, in turn, focused better on its military themes. Despite all these developments, a location for the official county museum remains' an issue.

The reasons for a new cultural facility cover the economic and educational. History museums have taken the concept of "heritage tourism," the marketing of history-related attractions, and converted it to justify their existence. In many cases the presence of a historic attraction does bring visitors who spend money in the community, new money that aids the tax base and supports jobs in hotels, restaurants, and retail. While a modest county museum would not realistically bring us thousands of guests, it would be a positive addition to an already impressive list of area attractions.

Museum still push the educational aspect, and that provides fewer economic features but more quality of life issues. While a true museum needs to collect and preserve, it also

must serve a public educational interest. This argument may not loosen purse strings and government support as it used to, but it remains a compelling argument. In smaller communities where the economic benefits of a museum are elusive, the educational, needs, a quality of life defense, and community pride and preservation of self identity remain.

So, in San Angelo we can declare that no current facility is taking that responsibility. And we know that a future museum would not duplicate any existing programs.

Next, where would we located such a museum? Of course, this question is tied to what type of museum we want, but let us examine some possible or common locations. Many country museums find homes in old courthouses. Well, Tom Green County does not have a used one for it demolished its Victorian classic of the 188s to make way for the current late 1920s version. Other communities house their local shrines in an old house, sometimes the home of a leading citizen, sometimes just an old structure that is important because it survived. The White-Poole House in Odessa reflects such a survivor.

Old homes do not always make the best locations for museums as they lack the proper heat and cooling, accessibility, parking, office, storage, and support space, and sometimes, a marketable location. Also, the theme of the house or its builder can overwhelm the totality of the museum's true mission. You must consider expenses as rehabbing an old home can be difficult. Museums are similar to restaurants: location--location--location!

So why don't we locate it near the current center of the city's expanding El Paseo de Santa

Angela. Go where the people are--or will be! If that is agreeable, then what structure?

Will the Olde Towne project have a feasible structure? Probably not. Many have argued for a county museum at the fort. Precedent exists with our Robert Wood Johnson Museum of Frontier Medicine in the Post Hospital, the Concho Valley Pioneers Heritage Center in Officers' Quarters 1, and the Verizon/GTE Danner Museum of Telephony in Officers' Quarters 4. We also hosted the art museum for fifteen years. Only a few underused fort buildings offer a venue, and it would take advantage of a known location with successful programs and events.

WHAT would go into a county museum and what kind of a museum would we create? Museums have leapt far beyond the "grandmother's attic" concept of several generations past. There is an urge to show everything with a fear of open space. Guests see all; understand less; and wonder just what makes this collection any more special than the other local shrines they have endured. Certainly, any local history museum needs a thoughtful blend of artifacts, photos, and documents, supported by good technological aspects, that covers the county's people, places and events. Also critical is placing the local scene into regional, state and national context.

But who chooses what is exhibited and where is some of it to be found? The fort has some good material, so does the historical society, as does the West Texan Collection at ASU, as well as local citizens. Who chooses what events are important? Will any unpleasant issues be covered? Will it be thematic or chronological? How high-tech can it

be, given that museums now embrace the Disney-like aspect of our culture. How will the museum be laid out? We must consider these and many more questions.

WHO will oversee this process and the subsequent issues to be noted. Will there be a committee, a consultant's study, a government agency, a non-profit board? How will committee members be chosen and by whom, and how long do they serve? And that just starts the fun. If we create a county museum, will it have a board and who will serve on it? While these questions become more relevant upon the creation of a museum, they need serious thought before money is spent and a building is adopted or adapted.

And HOW will this museum be operated and funded, assuming that we can pay for its creation. Undercapitalization kills most new businesses, and the same holds true for museums. Building is fun, exciting, contagious; operations can be monotonous, static, and unpopular. But it has to be done! Insurance, utilities, supplies, not to count staff if there is any, can run up, even in the most modest operation. In a volunteer organization, and who would those volunteers be, costs also arise. Some organizations create guilds or volunteer groups, and that raises the organizational questions mentioned earlier.

Once built and open, museums need a regular routine and hours. What would those be and how will they be maintained?

Lastly we look at money, and let us call it exactly what it is, not revenue, income, support, or some other term. It is money. Money will build you a museum and money

will maintain it. Today's mantra is "sustainability." If you build it, maybe they'll come, but if you build it, you have to take care of it.

A Tom Green County Historical Museum has a nice ring to it. Tonight, we identified the need for an institution We must locate and refine the resources needed to make it happen; plan the ways to support and operate it, and follow all applicable city, state, federal rules plus non-profit guidelines and responsibilities. Sometimes people point to the fort's success, and we are grateful for the praise and recognition, but let us not forget that Fort Concho's role has changed several times since the 1930s and has even been in total danger two generations ago. Other museums could say the same.

So where do you go from here?